

Shafter Bridge
Sir Francis Drake Boulevard
Lagunitas vicinity
Marin County
California

HAER No. CA-10

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

SHAFTER BRIDGE

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Location: Spanning Lagunitas Creek on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard,
Lagunitas Vicinity, Marin County, California

Date of Construction: 1924

Present Owner: Marin County
Department of Public Works
San Rafael, California

Present Use: Highway bridge

Significance: Associated with work of John C. Oglesby, an
important and long-time County Surveyor, City
Engineer, and private surveyor responsible
for many of the bridges extant in Marin County.
Only open spandrel arch bridge in Marin
County. This type of bridge was closely
associated with the development of the Calif-
ornia State highway system.

Historian: Carroll W. Pursell, Jr., November 1979

BACKGROUND

During the years after the end of the Civil War, the continued and startling growth of San Francisco and its surrounding areas created a demand for redwood lumber which could no longer be met by easily accessible stands of timber. By 1870 logging around the Russian River was becoming active, and in 1871 the North Pacific Coast Railroad was incorporated to tap that rich lumber supply for the Bay Area. Most of its initial backers had significant timber holdings of their own, but James McMillan Shafter, member of the board and first president of the line, had other interests.¹

Born in Vermont on May 27, 1816, he graduated from Wesleyan College, studied the law, served for seven years as the Vermont Secretary of State, then caught the western contagion and moved to Wisconsin. There he rose to the office of Speaker of the State Assembly before moving on again, this time to San Francisco. In California he served as a State Senator during the early years of the Civil War, became a Regent of the new University of California, and died

in 1892 one of the most famous and respected members of the San Francisco bar.² He was also one of the largest landowners in the Point Reyes peninsula.³

Although it had originally been planned that the North Pacific Coast Railroad should head north from San Rafael to the Russian River, some of its backers with land interests in West Marin, including Shafter, persuaded the board of directors to take the more difficult route westerly from San Rafael, over White's Hill to Point Reyes Station, and thence north through Tomales to Cazadero in the Russian River area.

Primarily this was to bring trade, progress, and enhanced land values to West Marin. In part it was to tap the lumber and tourist activities of the San Geronimo Valley as well as Samuel P. Taylor's paper mill.⁴

The line was opened in 1875 and twenty years later, in 1895, the last major addition was made, a spur track which was driven three miles up Lagunitas Canyon to reach one more grove of virgin redwoods. The spur, which left the main line in the middle of a trestle, was called the Shafter Branch.⁵ A 1911 timetable of the line listed Shafter Station as precisely 0.62 miles west of Lagunitas and 1.99 miles east of Camp Taylor--and just 25.41 miles north

of San Francisco.⁶

A San Francisco newspaper marvelled during the summer vacation season of 1892 that "the borders of Lagunitas Creek are lined with tents."⁷ From the opening of the railroad in 1875 until the last car ran in 1933, the North Pacific Coast and its successors continued to service the thousands of city and suburban residents who flocked to camp sites in the redwoods or summer homes in West Marin. Taylor had apparently begun the habit by welcoming campers to the property around his paper mill, and he later built a hotel to cater to the less hardy. Towns grew up in the valley and San Geronimo was large enough to have a post office by 1895. Lagunitas followed suit in 1906, Forest Knolls in 1916, and Woodacre in 1925. Eventually camping facilities too became permanent when the old paper mill lands were purchased to make Samuel P. Taylor State Park in 1945.⁸

BUILDING SHAFTER BRIDGE

The transportation needs of the San Geronimo Valley had, of course, been served by wagon roads for decades before the arrival of the railrcad. By 1924

one of the links in the main road, which roughly paralleled the railroad tracks from San Anselmo to Point Reyes Station, had fallen into disrepair. On April 8, 1924, the Marin County Board of Supervisors adopted plans and specifications for "a reinforced concrete bridge crossing Lagunitas Creek at Shafter Station," to replace a wooden bridge that stood slightly to the south of the new alignment. The plans and specifications had been prepared by the County Surveyor, John C. Oglesby.⁹

Oglesby, during his long career in Marin County, was undoubtedly the most influential engineer and surveyor in the area's history. Born in Alabama in 1885, he graduated from the University of Alabama with a degree in civil engineering. While still a young man he moved to Arizona, then to California, arriving in Marin County in 1913. He was soon employed as city engineer by the Town of Larkspur, a position he held until 1962. Indeed, during his long career he served as city engineer for every municipality in the county.

In addition to his work for cities, from 1919 to 1927, and again from 1942 until the office was abolished in 1954, Oglesby served as Marin County

Surveyor. As such he laid out many of the major roads in the region, including the Panoramic and Shoreline Highways, and, of course, was responsible for many of the county bridges erected during these years, including that at Shafter Station.¹⁰

Having accepted Oglesby's plans and specifications, the Board of Supervisors instructed the Clerk to advertise for the actual building of the bridge. On May 8, seven bids were received and that of T. A. MacDougall & Son being the lowest (\$8,545.00), it was accepted.¹¹ T. A. MacDougall and his son E. R. MacDougall were associated as general contractors and operated out of the father's home at 716 Lincoln Avenue in San Rafael.¹²

The bridge was apparently finished by the end of the summer because on September 23, the Board ordered the Clerk to dispose of the old wooden bridge that had formerly served at the site. Bids were to be received by October 7, and the successful buyer then had sixty days to remove the structure.¹³

Perhaps inspired by the building of a substantial and attractive new bridge, the local citizens of the San Geronimo area immediately began agitating for a general overhaul and upgrading of their major highway.

On July 8 "a committee of citizens from Woodacre, San Geronimo, Nicasio, Forest Knolls, Lagunitas and Olema" presented the Board with a set of resolutions adopted at a meeting two nights before, and several members of the delegation addressed the Board on "the matter of taxes for road purposes, road conditions and other matters."¹⁴ The effort must have been a popular one, for late in September The Marin Journal noted optimistically that the Board had let a contract for the construction of "an asphaltic concrete road 16 feet wide" from Manor (now Fairfax) to the foot of White's Hill. "It is understood," according to the paper, "that this work is the first unit of the Manor-Point Reyes Station and Tomales road which when completed will open the entire northern end of Marin county to extensive travel and trade."¹⁵ A few days later the Board of Supervisors ordered Surveyor Oglesby to "submit to this board an estimate of the cost for the improvement of the County road from the top of White's Hill through the Villages of Olema and Point Reyes Station to Tomales as a preparatory estimate of cost for a road bond issue."¹⁶ Within only a few years a move would be made to symbolize the importance of this improved

route by renaming it the Sir Francis Drake Boulevard.¹⁷

THE SHAFTER BRIDGE (27C-39)

The bridge which Oglesby designed for the crossing of Lagunitas Creek at Shafter Station was a handsome reinforced concrete, open-spandrel arch--the only one in the county. Its two spans are 56' and 26.5' respectively, and the total length of the bridge is 85.75'. The concrete was cast in place, and the deck is continuous with transverse floor beams and longitudinal girders on each side. These are supported by posts on arches, one on each side. The massive east abutment is of stone, the west is reinforced concrete wing walls. The two lanes have a total width of 24.5'. The rails are of reinforced concrete with windows.

The open-spandrel arch type of reinforced concrete bridge was characteristic of West Coast bridges at their best and most distinctive during the period 1910-1940. The style was established on a grand scale with the Colorado Street bridge in Pasadena (1913) and was soon adopted for long span bridges on the State highway system. With the coming of Harlan

D. Miller to be the first head of the State's Bridge Department, the style flourished, culminating after Miller's death in the spectacular series of bridges on the Coast Route between Monterey and Morro Bay.

EVALUATION

The Shafter Bridge (27C-39) appears to meet the requirements for eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. As a structure it possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Since 1924 it has been unmoved and, so far as can be told, unaltered. Its surroundings have changed little, presenting the same sylvan recreation possibilities as it has for over a century. The creation of the Samuel P. Taylor State Park no more than 75 yards from the bridge makes the latter a virtual gateway to that popular camping and picnicing area.

The Shafter Bridge is also associated with two of the most significant builders in the history of Marin County. As one of only two named bridges in the county (the other being the nearby Irving Bridge), it readily recalls the pioneer Shafter family of

West Marin and San Francisco, and in particular James McMillan Shafter, the first President of the North Pacific Coast Railroad. As a major design project of John C. Oglesby, it remains the most dramatic and significant of his bridges still on active service as part of a public highway.¹⁸ As a long-time County Surveyor, city engineer, and private surveyor and subdivider, Oglesby emerges as one of the most important citizens of the county during the past century.

Finally, as the only open spandrel arch bridge in the county, the Shafter Bridge is a local example of an important and distinctive design type that was closely associated with the rise of the California State highway system. No longer utilized, this lovely style is rapidly disappearing around the State, the total inventory currently amounting to less than an average of two per county.

NOTES

¹ A. Bray Dickinson, Narrow Gauge to the Redwoods: The Story of the North Pacific Coast Railroad and the San Francisco Bay Paddle-wheel Ferries. (2d ed., Corona del Mar: Trans-Anglo Books, 1970), p. 19.

² Jack Mason, Point Reyes: The Solemn Land (Inverness: North Shore Books, 1970), pp. 32-33; Flora Haines Loughead, ed., Life, Diary and Letters of Oscar Lovell Shafter... (San Francisco: The Blair-Murdock Co., 1915), pp. 237-239.

³ Mason, pp. 32-33.

⁴ Gilbert H. Kneiss, Redwood Railways: A Story of Redwoods, Picnics and Commuters (Berkeley: Howell-North, 1956), p. 42.

⁵ Dickinson, pp. 87-88.

⁶ Reproduced in ibid., p. 121.

7 Quoted in ibid., p. 127.

8 Louise Teather, Discovering Marin: Historical Tour by Cities and Towns (Fairfax: A. Philpott, The Tamal Land Press, 1974), pp. 57-60.

9 Marin County Board of Supervisors, Road Minutes (April 8, 1924), V, p. 319.

10 An obituary of Oglesby, including a photograph, is in the (San Rafael) Independent-Journal, 5 July 1972; additional information from a telephone conversation with his step-son Andrew Ferrier, December 7, 1979.

11 Marin County Board of Supervisors, Road Minutes (May 8, 1924), I, pp. 322-323.

12 The Independent's Marin County Directory...1925 (Oakland: R.L. Polk & Co., 1925), p. 73.

13 Marin County Board of Supervisors, Road Minutes (September 23, 1924), V, p. 337; The Marin Journal, 25 September 1924.

- 14 Marin County Board of Supervisors, Road Minutes
(July 8, 1924), V, p. 327
- 15 The Marin Journal, 25 September 1924.
- 16 Marin County Board of Supervisors, Road Minutes
(October 6, 1924), V, p. 338.
- 17 Fairfax Board of Trustees, Minutes (May 15, 1931),
I, p. 31.
- 18 The nearby Old Tocaloma Bridge, also designed by
Oglesby and reportedly one of his favorites, is now
on private land.

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